

form with great skill and great bravery. We thank them; we thank their loved ones. We appreciate their sacrifice.”

By nightfall on March 20, United States and coalition ground forces had crossed onto Iraqi soil beneath cover of the largest barrage of Naval and Air Force firepower ever used. Less than two months after leaving Beaufort, Marines from MWSS-273 and Sailors from the Naval Hospital found themselves racing across the desert.

The Sweathogs from '273 specialize in aviation logistics support including creating expeditionary airfields and maintaining supply chains. The NHB sailors also led from the front, assisting in construction of the first expeditionary Naval hospital in Iraq.

The combat phase of OIF was an intense but brief encounter. While aircraft pounded the Iraqi ground forces, the coalition's own ground units streamed through southern Iraq. On April 9, Iraqis cheered as American troops pulled down a giant statue of Hussein, marking the fall of the Baath Regime and the capital city, Baghdad. On May 1, the president declared the combat phase of the operation was over.

“My fellow Americans, major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed,” President Bush said, during a televised address to the nation. “And now our coalition is engaged in securing and

reconstructing that country.”

The Tri-Command units made their mark. The T-Bolts dropped more than 730,000 pounds of ordnance during 502 combat missions. The Hawks of '533 earned the highest mission success rate of any squadron under Marine Aircraft Group 31 and the Silver Eagles dropped more than 313,000 pounds of ordnance in support of special operations forces in northern Iraq.

Fightertown's successes did not go unnoticed.

“Our east coast squadrons were a valuable asset because of the success they had,” said Commanding General, Maj. Gen. James F. Amos, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing. “We were very glad to have the Hawks, T-Bolts and our augments under our wing, and we look forward to working with them again in the future.”

Unfortunately, for all of the Tri-Command's successes in OIF, there was still tragedy for one Beaufort Marine. In April, Cpl. Armando Ariel Gonzalez, motor vehicle operator and dispatcher, MWSS-273, was killed when a commercial refueler he was working on collapsed.

“Gonzalez will always be remembered as a person who always had a smile and was filled with great pride in serving his country,” said Lt. Col. Clarence Prevatt, commanding officer, MWSS-273. “He was a

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Sgt. Zachary A. Bathon

Marines from Combat Engineer Platoon, Battalion Landing Team, 2nd Bn., 2nd Marines, 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable), place explosives on a Baath Party regime symbol outside the Qalatsukar secret police station.